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Transforming public administration for sustainable development

Promoting leadership, innovation and risk management for sustainable development

Note by the Secretariat

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Promoting leadership, innovation and risk management for sustainable development

Summary

In the present paper, the author explores and discusses the kind of transformation in public administration and public leadership that needs to be undertaken to enable Governments and countries to pursue and achieve sustainable development. The question of risk management is also highlighted as a function that demands the attention of public administration and leadership in order to ensure the well-being of current and future generations. The author cautions that the international community should avoid the notion that sustainable development is only for developing countries, especially because even some developed countries have not achieved the Millennium Development Goals. The critical role of political leadership in initiating and promoting transformation is juxtaposed with the role of public administration in ensuring continuity and stability, and officials in both areas need to work in constant collaboration to ensure stable progressive change towards sustainable development. Part of the effort to transform public administration by aligning it with the requirements of achieving sustainable development lies in building and developing institutions of governance and public administration to make them flexible and supportive of sustainable development, especially since it requires partnerships, collaboration, change, the rule of law, peace and security, transparency and accountability and human rights. In addition to the development of appropriate institutional arrangements, the paper calls for innovation in governance and public administration, such as the extensive use of modern information and communications technologies in government work, including engagement with citizens, feedback and performance evaluation. As a process involving constant change, achieving sustainable development involves a high level of risk-taking. Consequently, the paper calls for public administration and leadership to adopt risk management practices and to develop appropriate capacities in public administration to measure and manage risk. The author also calls for constant capacity development of the public service in order to upgrade knowledge and skills in public administration, including knowledge management, without which sustainable development will be difficult to achieve.

I. Introduction

1. There are important contextual changes, trends and vectors in new demands that should be kept in mind when seeking answers to the question "What transformation is needed in public adn.inistration so that institutions are better able to contribute to sustainable development?"

2. The year 2015 is fast approaching, and the international community is taking stock of the state of implementation of the Millennium Development Goals. While significant progress has been made, there has not been a satisfactory rate in the achievement of the Goals in a number of countries. Without going into the reasons why, since ample analyses arc available, it should be noted that the Goals are of key importance as a high-level way to address the lack of development progress made throughout the world in recent decades and to change that for the better.

3. Many experts have been engaged in trying to gather data on the various endeavours undertaken and development projects carried out in order to assess how much they have contributed to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals. One important conclusion might be that, with respect to the as-yet-unspecified sustainable development goals, all States Members of the United Nations should first break them down at the national level and determine how best to incorporate the new goals into their government programmes and the work of their public administration systems.

4. It might be useful to look back at Agenda 21 of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development to learn how to localize sustainable development, as was done through the adoption of local Agenda 21s. Development actors should focus on determining how to achieve these new goals (once they have been established) and on allocating adequate financial resources for their achievement. Progress should be monitored in an objective way. Sustainable development will be a programme for all nations, regardless of their levels of development.

5. It will be important to overcome the notion that sustainable development is only for developing countries. The recent past has shown that not all of the countries of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development have achieved the Millennium Development Goals. To the contrary, in some of them poverty continues to rise. All nations face the problematic aspects of development reflected in the new set of goals. The process of their formulation continues, and there is strong demand for the addition of new goals, including with respect to youth employment.

6. Globalization is a reality, and it continues to intensify. It has served as an illustration of the limits of State authority as a result of the lack of regulation, for example, in financial markets. There is a need for improved self-regulation at the national level, but many rules have to meet the same standards at the regional and global levels.

7. The role of Governments must be reviewed and strengthened. Where trust in Governments has waned, efforts are needed to rebuild it. More citizens are taking to the streets to express their dissatisfaction and are mobilizing the media to focus greater attention on the subject.

8. The influence of the social media in obtaining access to knowledge silos within Governments has been demonstrated repeatedly, resulting in calls for greater participation of the people at the local and national levels. The apparent trend

towards decentralization will likely continue to grow. Another highly visible trend in many countries is the increase in consultation with and the engagement of institutional stakeholders, whose inclusion in the identification of problems and solutions is becoming an increasingly routine practice.

9. The use of new information and communications technologies in public administration will increase transparency and accountability. However, such progress is not all that is wanted. More widespread deployment of effective e-government solutions faces obstacles, because not all Governments seek transparency, including in the area of records management.

10. All these trends, and probably many others, favour the transformation of public administration. However, public administration is faced with exponentially growing complexities in fulfilling its tasks, compounded by a lack of financial means and well-trained human resources with which to do so. Finding the right balance is key to the success of Governments in addressing the challenges of sustainable development, as highlighted in the chapters below.

II. Leadership and its role in transformation

11. Just as there are different ideas regarding leadership and management — with "leadership" widely understood as defining where to go and "management" widely understood as managing operational activities — we often see similar distinctions with respect to politics and administration. Politicians are elected by their constituencies and have the particular task of leading the country on its path towards the future, whereas the role of public administration is to implement the political will of the Government and ensure the proper functioning of the State.

12. The scope of activities of public administration is defined by laws and rules. But those rules and the mandates derived from existing laws are not always effective enough to provide for the best possible services or for solutions to problems. Hence, public administration has a duty to ensure that decision makers in government abolish obsolete laws and adapt regulations or create new laws and related rules. In public administration, there is considerable space for leadership which is often lacking or underused, in providing the best possible public services to the people and the Government. Such leadership can easily be deployed without undermining the distinctive roles and tasks of actors in the political and administrative arenas. Those roles and tasks must be clearly organized, well understood and appropriately carried out. Governments lead and control public administration, but a solely top-down approach does not always lead to the desired results. A balanced approach with shared responsibility is needed to best serve the people and the country.

13. The policies and functions of public administration are generally characterized by greater continuity than the platforms of political parties and the mandates of politicians, which are subject to periodic elections. Public administration may therefore be regarded as better able to ensure continuity where it is needed.

14. Ensuring coherence among government policies is a highly effective way of making the tasks of public administration easier. The manner in which sustainable development is integrated into public administration policies and work programmes will therefore be of key importance. Many entities are keen to play the role of coordinator but do not show readiness to be coordinated by others. Assigning clear

roles to the entities concerned and promoting a culture of cooperation rather than control may be helpful.

15. It might be worthwhile to consider incentivization schemes to reward and speed up the implementation of particular programmes. Sustainable development will require new ways to deploy collaborative leadership within national public administrations, in particular with local governance structures. In this regard, a strong institutional framework for sustainable development will be of the utmost importance.

16. In recent years, the expertise of managers and the capacity of Governments have been brought into question, with faith increasingly being placed instead in quantitative indicators of performance, third-party government and contracts as the new mechanism of governance.[1]

17. Is there a need to abandon performance management in public administration in favour of democratic performance governance? There is room for such an idea, and it could well add value in a world of diffuse power. That is why in many countries the call for the reintroduction of public management and for stronger public financial management is being clearly heard. Often, it is also a call for evidence-based public organizations.[2]

18. In short, if Governments lack sufficient leadership and explicit political will, it will become difficult for public administrations to build strong frameworks in support of sustainable development. In that case, leaders in public administrations may have to call explicitly for the needed political leadership. Ultimately, it will be the citizens and the institutions who expect to be provided with services. To manage them well is among the duties of well-functioning public administrations.

19. Leaders are good listeners. They know how to draw upon different opinions and views in making their own conclusions and decisions. Leaders are also good followers, because they know what is needed to mobilize people and prepare them for change.

20. Seneca once said that if one does not know to which port one is sailing, no wind is favourable. Leaders must anticipate future developments and change.

III. The need for a strong institutional framework for sustainable development

21. If there is the political will to transform public administration so that it can better contribute to sustainable development, it is imperative that a strong institutional framework for doing so be created. The architecture of such a framework could be based on the outcome document of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, held in June 2012. The vision set out in that document, entitled "The future we want" (General Assembly resolution 66/288,

[1] See Donald P. Moynihan, "From performance management to democratic performance governance", in *The Future of Public Administration around the World: The Minnowbrook Perspective* (Georgetown University Press, 2010).

[2] See Justin Marlowe and Daniel Smith, "Adding value in a world of diffuse power: reintroducing public management and public financial management", in *The Future of Public Administration around the World: The Minnowbrook Perspective* (Georgetown University Press, 2010).

annex), was one of broad, inclusive and equitable economic growth, equitable social development and environmental protection of benefit to all, based on and supported by freedom, peace and security, human rights, democracy, good governance and the rule of law.

22. Progress towards those goals will require continued political commitment, integration and coherence across policy areas, and well-functioning institutions at all levels, with a leading role for Governments and with the participation of all relevant stakeholders, including civil society.

23. In paragraphs 75 and 76 of "The future we want", world leaders outlined a strengthened institutional framework for sustainable development that would, inter alia:

(a) Be based on a results-oriented approach;

(b) Enhance coherence;

(c) Reduce fragmentation and overlap;

(d) Increase effectiveness and efficiency;

(e) Enhance transparency and accountability;

(f) Reinforce coordination and cooperation;

(g) Promote the full and effective participation of all countries in decision-making processes;

(h) Promote the science-policy interface.

24. As indicated above, the driver in building this architecture must be the Government. In most countries, the task of building such a framework is entrusted to leaders in public administration.

25. The foundation for this architecture has been developed and widely discussed in various United Nations forums, in particular in the Economic and Social Council in recent years, and the need for capacity-building, administrative reform, improved performance, sound financial management and human resource development with respect to legal and regulatory governmental capacities has been repeatedly emphasized in that context. Yet the management and implementation of development programmes has remained an issue for donors as well as for partners in using those resources. Changes in key personnel at the middle and top management levels have been a common response to inadequate performance in terms of reform. Such changes, however, have often been made in the absence of the guidance provided by programme evaluation. A better approach would have been to first conduct proper evaluations of the reform programmes in order to align them with current and future needs. There are lessons to be learned on how to do better in the post-2015 period, and they should be examined and conclusions drawn from them.

26. Proper knowledge management will be key in this regard. The knowledge contained in an institution should be more than the total knowledge of the individuals working in it. Knowledge is the structural capital of an institution, and it should be organized in such a way as to facilitate the accomplishment of the institution's mission over time. The Department of Economic and Social Affairs might well be able to play a key role in setting up knowledge centres in Governments in order to assist in mobilizing knowledge for the implementation of

sustainable development. It goes without saying that effective public administration conducts periodic reviews to determine what skills are needed for new tasks and provides the required training and capacity-building in a timely manner.

IV. Innovation in support of transformation

27. Science, technology, innovation and culture were the focus of the annual ministerial review of the Economic and Social Council held in July 2013. The related report of the Secretary-General, prepared by the Department of Economic and Social Affairs in consultation with other entities of the United Nations system, notably the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization and the World Intellectual Property Organization (E/2013/54), examined innovation in both the public and private sectors, including questions relating to transparency, openness and participation, the science-policy interface, private-public partnerships and national innovation strategies.

28. Key questions to consider in this regard include the following:

(a) What would a research agenda look like that supports the transformation of public administration to facilitate sustainable development?

(b) What should change in educational curricula to shape the future of public administration?

(c) What system of incentives could make a difference in terms of promoting innovation and its practical use?

29. It goes without saying that a repository of knowledge about innovations, new approaches and inventions, as well as lessons learned with regard to both successes and failures, could be of great use. Knowledge is a resource that grows the more we use and the more we share it.

30. While the science-policy interface is essential in finding effective solutions based on solid scientific evidence and/or proven methods, it is just as essential that the leaders in public administration know the role of science in the preparation of important projects and in the validation of the results. It is unfortunate that many such leaders fail to realize the potential of obtaining support from those in the scientific community, who sometimes are unaware of practical needs outside their field and of how they could contribute to better outcomes.

31. It might be advisable for Governments to request from their public administration officials an open agenda of needs with respect to areas in which science can best be used to obtain more accurate and relevant data as well as to improve communication. Such an agenda could also be used to address needs in terms of teaching and learning to support civil servants in facing their new challenges and in implementing change. A national dialogue between partners and stakeholders could facilitate the development of new curricula, including specialized courses; it could also serve as an indicator of future requirements.

32. It is clear that one of the most significant engines of change over the past 20 years has been information and communications technologies (ICTs). In order to make the best possible use of such technologies, most work processes, workflows and procedural laws have had to be examined and rethought. ICTs have proved to be instrumental in improving management and, by enhancing transparency and

efficiency, have helped to make public administration more professional, ethical and responsive. In many cases, the use of ICTs in e-government has made governance more participatory and accountable.

33. Public administrations face many challenges, and many question whether their services are still needed or whether some or all of those services could be provided online or outsourced. The new technologies are changing the way in which the public interacts with those in public administrations.

34. Communication between government and citizens is no longer a one-way street. The use of social media to express concerns and frustrations regarding poor service delivery, as well as to make demands, is sharply increasing. The trend of using public monitoring platforms or monitoring boards to assess the quality and quantity of services delivered will soon be developed into a new business of information technology applications in high demand by politicians, ambitious government officials and political parties, as well as citizens' organizations.

35. In this way, public administration is becoming not only a publicly rated service deliverer, but also an ombudsman-platform that enables citizens to express their criticisms and dissatisfaction.

36. ICTs may even have some bearing on political elections. Venerable parties and their representatives may find themselves competing for attention with other personalities capable of using communications technologies to translate interest in popular issues into votes at election time.

37. These trends will not make the lives of those in public administrations easier. To the contrary, the management of diversity and expectations will become more important, and public exposure will increase.

V. Successfully managing risks

38. Sustainable development, in and of itself, is a form of risk management. Sustainability encompasses a regulatory process of impact assessment in the area of public administration. Yet, this kind of built-in risk assessment can lead to a fragmentation of risks. In general, knowledge about how to assess risks is better developed than knowledge about how to manage them.

39. Unfortunately, funds are more often used to cover damage than to prevent it. Risk prevention is one of the best possible investments, but its results are often difficult to measure.

40. Chief risk officers can often be found at the upper management levels of private companies. The tasks of an equivalent official in public administration would include not only assessing risks for the Government and ensuring the well-being of citizens, but also advising the country's top leaders on how best to manage and reduce those risks and what changes to make to reduce vulnerability or what risk insurance to provide.

41. The populations of different countries are exposed to different patterns of risk. Often, they might not be aware of those risks. Sound public management involves addressing risks in an appropriate manner on the basis of facts rather than emotions. The degree of vulnerability might differ according to the pattern of the risk or the scale of the danger or threat. It is therefore an issue of building confidence that

Governments and their public administrations are concerned about potential risks, assess them appropriately and incorporate their considerations and concerns into their decision-making processes. The mapping of risks thus becomes a regular task and can be reviewed from time to time. This is important not only with regard to natural hazards/risks (e.g., where public buildings should be placed to protect them from floods or landslides) but also, and increasingly, regarding industrial risks (e.g., hazardous waste and chemicals).

42. Risk-mapping will also make citizens better aware of threats and involve them in the effective management of natural resources and their own environment. The accumulation of risks can lead to chronic vulnerability, especially when there is exposure to natural hazards (e.g., the impact of climate change on weather patterns, greater weather extremes, shorter sequences, etc.).

43. Modern and timely emergency management must utilize collaborative governance at all levels. The effective functioning of these public services is of great political importance and can save lives.

44. Emergency management employs methods of decision-making and communication that differ from the norm, but once normalcy returns, the changes needed to manage rebuilding require well-organized planning, and the "normal rules" should once again be applied.

45. When we look at the sustainable development goals, the most immediate questions that arise will be, "What are the risks of not achieving them at the local, national, regional and global levels?" and "What are the costs of not achieving them in a timely manner?" Obviously, the concern is greatest where people are directly involved and/or the suffering is of the greatest magnitude. Sustainable development should therefore address these aspects in order to identify the most appropriate risk assessments and actions. This must be done in a deliberate and orderly manner, because not only the question of whether things were done correctly, but also the question of whether the right things were done, will have to be answered.

46. Public administrations would be well advised to consider these risk management issues in an appropriate framework and with well-trained personnel, in order to ensure the best possible results. Citizens will ask their Governments whether they have done their utmost to protect and secure the livelihoods of current and future generations.

VI. Conclusions

47. In most countries, large parts of the public administration are faced with exponentially increasing complexity and must cope with growing volumes of work, often with reduced levels of financial means and human resources. These constraints must be borne in mind when the work of achieving sustainable development is undertaken. The challenges of meeting the requirements of sustainable development set out in the post-2015 development agenda will require particular attention and additional resources. Appropriate capacity-building and human resources training must go hand in hand and will require continued political will and support.

48. The strengthening of public administration in preparing for the changes required to best achieve and support the new sustainable development goals will require considerable investment (e.g., knowledge, tools, and training). If such

investment is not adequate, the necessary support will be slow in coming, and public administration will not be equipped to cope with the numerous challenges and an increasingly critical population requiring greater access to information and the participation of stakeholders in decision-making. All stakeholders must be focused on the achievement of these new goals.

49. Confidence-building, accountability, inclusiveness and accurate reporting will be key to the successful transformation of public administration and the effective provision of services to people. Public administration will require a high degree of professionalism, attention and recognition. We would all be well advised to make it fit for such transformation and for new tasks.